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ANTIQUITY AND AUTHORITY OF THE HEBREW ACCENTS.

From Davidson's Outlines of Hebrew Accentuation.

The supposed authority of the accents is very dependent on their supposed antiquity. The accents form now a part of all our printed Bibles. The fact is curious. Why are they there, and by what authority? Here on the one hand we are in danger of falling under the influence of a derationalizing superstition, and on the other, under a supereilious flippancy, the well-beloved child of ignorance. The early reformed theologians looked on the accents as a divine institution, the immediate handiwork of Moses or Ezra, men commissioned of God, among other things, to bequeath this precious legacy to coming generations. The present race of men, conceited and ungrateful, look upon what Buxtorf revered as an effort of uncreated Wisdom, with contempt, as the childish finicalities of "mechanical" Jews. It is probable that the first opinion and the last are equally impertinent. We should hardly *a priori* expect an accentual revelation; and, lest *a priori* disproof should not carry conviction, it is enough to say that no evidence of such revelation is forthcoming. There are rabbinic testimonies enough, but so there are to many things that are impossible. At the same time we set out from the principle that a deliberately conceived and intricately worked out system, such as the Hebrew accentuation, must have a purpose and a meaning; and that Jews, though at times harboring foolish conceits, are much on a level as to rationality with other creatures. Hence we expect to find an *intention* at least in the accentuation, whether fully realized or not. And as all Jewish intentions looked in one direction, that of preserving inviolate their divinely inspired Scriptures, it is probable that if we can really read the intention of the accents, we shall not have lost, but gained in our esteem for human reverence and religious care, as well as in our accurate understanding of the Bible.

The system of accents, then, is neither to be attributed to highest divine wisdom nor deepest human folly. It is the result of a peculiar critical development of the human mind, a development not unconnected with other similar tendencies which appeared simultaneously, or in close succession, in Arabia on the south, and in Syria on the north of Palestine. We would be wrong in limiting this critical bent to any single family of the Semitic race, or circumscribing its activity to a very narrow circle of years. The three chief families of Semites seem to have manifested the tendency in common, priority to some degree in point of time and influence being due to the Syrians, who in their turn were stimulated by their contact and rivalry with the Greeks, and by the new mental energy communicated by the reception of the Christian religion and its sacred literature. We would be wrong in venturing to say that this peculiar criticism arose in such a year and expired in such another. Minds are exceedingly slow to motion. A direction cannot be communicated to a national mind without the concurrence of many forces, the application and success of which requires many years. And as mental springs are only gradually and painfully bent, they are only gradually and with

difficulty relaxed. A critical tendency will not terminate so abruptly that a precise date can be assigned to its expiry. If we take the close of the Talmud¹ on the one side and the close of the tenth century on the other, embracing a period of four or five hundred years, we shall have room enough for that peculiar class of men who conceived and completed the so-called Massoretic vowel and accentual system. Neither the vowels nor the accents are the discovery of one individual—they are likely the slow growth of centuries. Acute critics have noticed in different books of the Bible a slight difference of vocalization.² So, too, in the Hagiographa, a somewhat different accentuation is observable from that current in the other books, *e. g.*, in the frequent use of the accents Pāzēr and Qārnē phārāh,³ showing unmistakably a difference of hands.

Regarding antiquity and authority, a rational criticism cannot entertain any doubts on these two points—*first*, the novelty of the present vocalic and accentual signs; *second*, the antiquity of the sounds and style of declamation which they signify; the twofold accuracy with which tradition has handed down the pronunciation of the Bible text, and with which the present system of Massoretic points represents it. The briefest outline only of argument can be offered in support of these positions.⁴

(a) The peculiar nature of the Semitic word-stem. The idea lay in the bare consonantal stem itself; the modification of idea lay in the modified stem. But as the modification was either a change of vowel inside or a very apparent addition outside, the triliteral stem was itself still recognizable, and the fundamental idea it conveyed immediately suggested. Even the peculiar modification of idea was often suggested by a prefixed or added consonant, which was also a sort of index what vowel change was at the same time introduced, and altogether with the surrounding sense left a reader who was well versed in the tongue at no loss for the exact pronunciation and meaning.

To this has to be added the analogy of the other languages. In general the Semitic tongues are not vocalized. The Qoran,⁵ it is true was vocalized soon after Mohammed's death, but other works usually present the bare consonantal text. The Syrians most probably communicated the idea of a complete vocalization to

¹The Talmudic period was of about 310 years duration—183 to 498. Kiel, *Einleitung* s. 596. Leop. Dukes, *Sprache der Mischnah*, s. 15. Authorities do not entirely agree. Conf. Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden*, historisch entwickelt, s. 52 ff.

²Ewald, *Lehrbuch*, p. 136.

³*Ibid.*, p. 207, 99a. See, on the gradual rise and nature of the perfectly similar Syriac punctual system, Ewald, *Abhandlungen zur Orient. u. Bib. Literatur*, Erster Theil, art. iii, p. 53 foll.

⁴The first to fight the current Jewish dogma of the divinity of the points and their Mosaic or at least Ezraitic origin, was Elias Levita, himself a Jew. The modern invention of the accents and vowel signs has been most ably maintained by Ludovicus Cappellus, *Arcanum pentateuch punctationis revelatum*, published first by Erpenius 1624. The other side has been supported with great learning by the younger Buxtorf, in reply to Cappellus, in his *Tractatus de punct. origine, antiquitate, etc.*, 1648; a work containing much information on other subjects besides those in immediate dispute. The reader may consult, in addition to the above fundamental works (Spitzner, *Vindiciæ originis et auctor. divinæ punct. vocal.*, Lips., 1791, said to contain full information on the stages of the controversy and the circumstances of the disputants); Carpvov, *Critica Sacra*, chap. v. s. 7, in favour of the divine authority; Brian Walton's proleg. to his *Polyglot*, iii. 33 foll. against it; also Keil, *Einleitung*, s. 510 f. II.; Davidson's *Bib. Criticism*, p. 37 foll. In the present century the subject has been again most thoroughly discussed by Hupfeld, *Beleuchtung dunkler Stellen der Alttest. Textgeschichte*, Studien u. Kritiken, 1830, p. 549, etc., and 1837, p. 830 foll., which may be regarded as demonstrative of the post-Talmudic origin of the present punctual symbols. Also coinciding generally with Hupfeld, Ewald, *Lehrbuch*, p. 121-142.

⁵Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorans*, s. 305 folg. Göttingen, 1860.

the Jews, having themselves borrowed it from the Greeks. The Jewish Grammarians, however, far outstripped their Syrian guide, and forerunners.

(b) The peculiar aspect of the present Massoretic text. Very early the Jews employed the consonants ך and ם to express certain vowel or diphthongal sounds, especially when final; they also employed ם and ן, particularly the latter for the same purpose. And the Greek alphabet shows that this tendency appeared in very early times, and included even *ayin* among the vowel representatives. At first these vowel letters or *matres lectionis* were used very sparingly and only under necessity, and seldom are to be seen in the earlier books except where they are final or where there is a concourse of vowels; but in later Hebrew, when the Aramæan began to intrude upon the Palestinian speech, and the native language was less perfectly understood, writers such as Jeremiah and Ezechiel find it necessary to give the *scriptio plena*, that is, to vocalize much more frequently; and not seldom this vocalization of theirs conflicts with the Massoretic system afterwards superinduced upon it, *e. g.* כולם for כָּלָם, הובנים for הֶבֶן (höb).

And to this attaches itself the whole question of the Q'ri and K'thibh, the latter being the consonantal text which the vocalizer worked upon, and in which, from being already partially vocalized by another system than his own, he found certain things anomalous and not conformable to the laws of pronunciation current in his time, and supposed by him to be generally recognizable in the Old Testament text; the former being the readings recommended by him in these particular cases as substitutes for the anomalous readings which he found; the readings he recommended being conformable to the rules of pronunciation recognized by him as current in his day, and supposed by him to prevail generally in the Scriptures. But, obviously, if the punctuator or vocalizer and the original writer of the consonants were one and the same person such anomalies are totally inexplicable; and as these anomalous words occur in the latest books of the Old Testament, and there most frequently, (*e. g.* Daniel), the punctuation cannot have been anterior to the close of the Canon.

It may have been contemporary, however, with this event. But the fact that the vocalizer, whoever he was, stuck his own vocalization upon consonants which it did not fit, and did not presume to alter the consonantal text, makes this supposition unlikely and renders it probable that the punctuator did not feel himself to possess a similar authority to that of the original writers. In the hands of inspired writers the productions of previous inspired men are treated with all freedom. None are so remarkable for this free use of their predecessors as two of the later writers, Jeremiah and the Chronicler. They permit themselves the greatest liberties with the foregoing text, feeling their own divine commission to warrant any adaptation of previous divine words that their own times and circumstances may demand. The vocalizers, however, allow themselves no such freedom; they were conscious of standing on a much lower platform than the writers of the consonantal text. Hence any claim that may be put in for Ezra is not to be looked at.

(c) A more conclusive testimony is that of versions. (1) The Septuagint. Here there are two points—the remarkable agreement in many cases between the Septuagint and our present vocalization, and the equally remarkable disagreement

in others. Advocates of a preseptuagintal vocalization lay much weight on the former, their opponents equally much on the latter. The latter, the fact of deviation in such a multitude of instances—which we need not cite as any one can lay his hand on many such passages in the Septuagint, which are numerous in proportion to the difficulties of the text, and it is often quite evident *what* punctuation has been supplied to the naked consonants—seems quite conclusive against the existence of vowel signs at the time of this translation. For agreement is explicable from context and especially from tradition; disagreement on the supposition of a pointed text is explicable only on the hypothesis of erroneous punctuation on the part of MSS. employed by the Seventy, or erroneous punctuation on the part of our Massoretic Bibles. The former is improbable, *first*, from the nature of the undertaking, because on any hypothesis of object or translator, the best and correctest MSS. would be at the command of the authors; *second*, the deviations are too wide to be explicable on the ground of different punctuation, they are often the result of sheer conjecture put forth by an ignorance that felt itself completely at a loss. The latter hypothesis, error in our Massoretic Bibles, is a hypothesis destructive of our faith in our present punctuation, and is otherwise not to be entertained, because *per se* the Massoretic readings are widely more rational and self-testifying than those of the Septuagint. But to refer the blunders of the Septuagint to a vocalization at all, destroys our faith in all vocalization. For if such a vocalization existed so early, containing such manifold deviations from another vocalization which has now become current, we give little for either or both. It is satisfactory, however, to know that in Jerome's time the uniform conviction was that the Seventy had no vowels before them; and this Father explains and excuses their mistakes from that fact,—*verbi ambiguitate decepti* (in Isaiah, xxiv. 23).

(2) The Targums or Chaldee translations. The agreement of Onkelos with our present punctuation is something remarkable. It is hardly fair, however, to assert⁶ that hardly any deviations are to be found. There are a few good passages.⁷ In Jonathan's Targum on the Prophets the instances are numerous, and all Buxtorf's sophistry⁸ cannot explain them away. In the Targum of Pseudo Jonathan on the Pentateuch, or the Targum Jerushalmi, examples meet us everywhere. That Onkelos is more correct than the others arises partly from his own character as a scholar and faithful translator and adherent of his tradition, while the others—even Jonathan, to some extent—are mere paraphrasers, their additions in some cases amounting to actual Midrashim (*e. g.* on the Song); and partly from the plainness of the law, and the intimate acquaintance, for many reasons, of all Jews with its readings. This latter circumstance, it is, which accounts for the superiority of the Seventy's version of the Pentateuch. It is precisely, as with them, in the difficult passages, such as the song of Jacob, Gen. xlix., that Onkelos hesitates and loses hold of an unwavering tradition. It is a conjecture of Gesenius altogether groundless and intolerable, that the agreement between Onkelos and our own is to be explained by supposing Onkelos the basis of the later punctuation.⁹

(3) The Peshito Syriac. Here we need not go far to meet with many proofs

⁶ As does Buxtorff, *Tractatus de punct.*, p. 136.

⁷ See for examples, Winer de Onkeloso, p. 29 and ff.

⁸ *Tractat de punct.*, p. 138 ff.

⁹ *Geschichte der Hebr. Sprache*, s. 193.

that this translation was made from unpointed MSS. In Gen. xxii. 14, for example, **יִרְאָה** has been read **יִרְאָה**, instead of **יִרְאָה**. So, Gen. xlix. 24, **מִשֶׁם** from there, has been read and translated **מִשֶׁם** from *Shem*.¹⁰

(d) After the acute investigations of Hupfeld already alluded to, it must be conceded that Jerome, however much he knew of vowels and spake of them, knew nothing of our present vowel or accentual signs. He employs the term *accentus*, but not in the sense of accent, but of pronunciation.¹¹ It must be granted to the same author that the Talmud is also ignorant of vowel or accentual signs in our sense of the word.¹²

(e) To all this might be added much more. For example, the historic fact of a change of the form of the consonantal writing long after the close of the canon. Ezra has no claim to be regarded as the author of the present square character, nor has any single individual; that character is the slow result of time, and the operation of the double tendency to tachygraphy and calligraphy, producing on the one hand a rounder and swifter character than the old Phœnician, which is stiff and awkward and unconnected, and on the other appending points and corners, or Taggin, by way of ornament. But the present vowels can accommodate themselves only to the present consonants; these cannot have been generally current long before our era. and not exclusively even then, and so the vowels must be more recent still. Again, to the same effect is the unlawfulness of using in the synagogues a pointed text. The consonants alone were holy, the vowels common and unclean and excrescence of mere human growth upon the exclusively divine.

A final agreement may be referred to. In 1845, Dr. Pinner, the editor of the "Talmud, with German translation,"¹³ published a prospectus and list of MSS. belonging to the Odessa Society for History and Antiquities.¹⁴ The editor divides these MSS. into three classes: A. **ספרי תורה**, rolls of the law; B. **ספרי תנך**, rolls of Biblical books in general, law, prophets, and Hagiographa; C. **ספרי תלמוד וראונים**, Talmudic and rabbinical writings. In the second class, B, and in this class, No. 3—the later prophets—stands a MS. with a vocalization and accentuation widely different from our common Massoretic system. The MS. contains the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. The vowels and accents in this MS. differ from our own, not only in form and position, but also in number. In position, all the vowels, and nearly all the accents, stand above the line; in number the accents are fewer, the vowels more numerous, amounting in all to twenty. Pättäḥ-furtive does not appear; and there are no double accents, nor any post-positive or prepositive, but all stand on the tone-syllable.¹⁵ At the same time the vowel and accentual systems are fundamentally

¹⁰ For much information on this and other points connected with this version, see Hirzel, *De Pent. vers. Syr. quam Peshito vocant*, indole, p. 12, etc.; Credner, *De Proph. Minor. vers. Syr. indole*, p. 54 f and 91 c.

¹¹ Hupfeld, *Studien u. Kritiken*, 1830, p. 571.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 554.

¹³ Unfortunately, no more than the first volume even appeared, death having arrested the progress of the great work.

¹⁴ The somewhat lengthy title of Dr. Pinner's prospectus is "Prospectus der Odessaer Gesellschaft für Geschichte u. Alterthümer gehörenden ältesten Hebräischen und rabbinischen Manuscripte, ein Beitrag zur Biblischen Exegese; von Dr. Pinner, Herausgeber des Talmud mit Deutscher Uebersetzung, nebst einem lithographirten Fac-simile des Propheten **חִבְכּוֹק** Habaquq, aus einem Manuscripte vom Jahre, 916. Odessa auf Kosten der Gesellschaft, 18' 5

¹⁵ Those who have not access to the work of Pinner itself, may consult a good account of it, given by Ewald, *Jahrbücher*, 1848, p. 160 ff (art. vii.).

the same as those of the Massorites, agreeing in many cases to the slightest shades. This punctuation must have taken its rise somewhere in the East, and has accordingly been named the Assyrian system.¹⁶ Our present system is a native of the West, perhaps Tiberias. The MS. in which the Assyrian appears bears date 916. But from inspecting it, it can be seen at once that the particular system with which it is accented was not the only one known to the accentuators, but was beginning to give way before another, the Tiberian. Double punctuation occurs in several cases, and the first three verses of Malachi have been pointed quite according to our mode of punctuation.

These facts seem to indicate, beyond the reach of controversy, that the determination of the Jewish mind in the direction of vocalization and accentuation was not a determination peculiar to the western or Palestinian Jews, but common to them with their eastern or Assyrian countrymen. They show that the mere invention of symbols was a thing of comparatively modern date, and that the symbols took different forms in different regions. They show further that while different families constructed different systems of symbols, and worked independently, though contemporaneously, at giving sensuous form and outward expression to their tradition, it was yet a common tradition which they labored to express. So that while we cannot hesitate to believe in the comparatively modern rise of our present signs, we have every reason to consider ancient and primitive the pronunciation and declaration which they so successfully signify.¹⁷

CRITICAL+NOTES.

Inverted Nuns in the Bible.—Inverted Nūns are found in Ps. 107, between the 22d and 28th verses and in Num. 10, 35–36; see the larger Massorah on Ps. 107, and Num. 10. These abnormal and singular marks are of a very high antiquity; they were already in use several centuries before the vowel-signs and accent-signs were added to the consonant-text of the Bible. They are mentioned and commented upon in the Bab. Talmud Rosh-Hashanah 17 b. and Shabbath 116 a., in Sifrē ad Num. l. c., in Gen. Rabba chap. 64. During the Massorites' period and soon thereafter the statements and explanations concerning these marks multiply considerably. They are more or less spoken of in Tr. Sof^rim 6, 1, 2; Aboth d^rrabbi Nathan 34; Pesikta Zuṭratha ad Num. 10, in Nathan Romi's Talmudic Lexicon Arukh s. v. אָךְ; by Hai Gaon (quoted in Maggid Mishneh ad Maimon. Yad Hāzakah, Shabb. 11, 10); by Rashi in his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud passages under consideration; and in many other places. In the Talmud these marks are called סִימְנוֹת *signs*; in Sifrē, נְרוּדוֹת, *points*; in Sof^rim, שִׁפּוּר, *ornamentations*; by the Massorites and subsequent authors, נֻנִּים הַפּוֹכִים or נֻנִּין מְנוּרָוֹת, *inverted nuns*. But what is the meaning of these strange signs?

¹⁶ Babylon war das Saatfeld für die meisten Gattungen der jüdischen Litteratur. Fürst, Kultur u. Literaturgeschichte der Juden in Asien, p. 2, quoted by Donaldson, Jashar, p. 18, note.

¹⁷ See the arguments for the late origin of the punctuation, excellently stated (in addition to the books already mentioned) in Gesenius, Geschichte der Heb. Sprache, Abschnitt iii., B., p. 182 folg.; Jahn, Einleitung, § 96, s. 340, folg.; also Hävernik, Einleitung, i., 1, s. 304 ff., who borrows from Rupfeld. Also briefly, Horne's Introduction by Davidson, vol. ii., p. 18 and foll.